

## **Volunteering for International students and implications for language development, cultural awareness and employability.**

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### **Background and Rationale**

The emphasis which is often placed on the academic-related goals of an international student can often overlook the broader aims and benefits which can accompany their stay in the new host environment. In addition to their academic objectives which are clearly paramount, the international learner may also be concerned and motivated by a number of non-academic goals as well as having a serious interest in exploring a new culture and society and in making friends in the host community (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Barratt & Huba, 1994; Toyokawa, Toyokawa, & Matsudaira, 1998). International students, like home students, spend a great deal of time involved in out-of-class activities including their attendance at cultural events, their participation in sport or their involvement in part-time employment. Through such activities, these learners may have the chance to meet a number of people within the host community and to develop a deeper social and cultural awareness of their host society. As educators in our institutions or as observers of international students within our communities we are able to draw upon anecdotal evidence to show that there is a correlation between the engagement of international students in out-of-class activities and their adjustment to their host society. However, a number of studies have helped to crystallise this notion.

One of the most significant studies is Astin's (1984) involvement theory which states that the "amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that programme" (1984:298). The theory deals not only with benefits which students can obtain from academic-related activities but also with gains associated with out-of-class activities such as socialising with friends, engaging in social events and volunteering on and off campus (Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002). Pascarella's (1985) student development model builds on the involvement principle by suggesting that development is a function of the effort students invest in educationally-useful activities. Other studies by Astin (1977, 1993) found that involvement in sports programmes had positive effects on health, academic work, leadership and satisfaction with both life and the college experience. Bryant *et al.* (1994) noted gains in relationship building, self-confidence and social integration whilst both Bryant *et al.* (1994) and Haines (2001) reported benefits in the areas of physical well-being and stress reduction. Barcelona (2002) also indicated from his survey on student participation in campus recreational sports activities that "involvement in recreational sports has the potential to yield positive gains in students' ability to function as a member of a

team". Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) further referenced a link between a female student's participation as a childcare volunteer in the local community and clarification of her career goals.

The theory of student involvement - and the impact which out-of-class experiences have upon the learner - is central to Kuh's (1995) study on the relationship between out-of-class experiences and the learner's personal development through interactions between the learner and their institution's environments. The study, which provided data on 149 US college students, revealed development in intellectual, social and emotional awareness. Although its focus was primarily on home-based learners (only 6 were defined as 'international'), Kuh reported gains in personal development as a result of specific leadership responsibilities with 85% of the participants attributing one or more gains acquired through tasks such as the planning, organising, managing and decision-making. For example, whilst serving as student body president, one white University of California student learned how to plan budgets, manage resources and communicate with different groups of people. A further benefit revealed through the study was the impact which extracurricular involvement had upon the clarification of learners' career aims. One white Wichita State student, for instance, decided on a career in law whilst president of her sorority house after dealing with national and Wichita state rules during her extracurricular activities. Another student, a white University of California student, used his involvement in campus development projects to further his aim of going into real estate development. In equally reflective accounts, an African-American student from Xavier University explained how her part-time work on campus encouraged her to respond sensitively to complex office dynamics and a white Miami University student explained how her roles in hall government and community-related activities enabled her to realise the value of communication. Other personal development gains were noted in learners' awareness of cultural issues. For example, one African-American student at Mount Holyoke College commented upon gains in self-awareness through political discussions with people from different ethnic backgrounds, as did a white Earlham College student after spending a semester in Latin America and recognising the oppression of his own Colombian family. Final benefits were reported in the relationship between extracurricular involvement and the academic process itself with students commenting favourably upon the way in which out-of-class discussions helped them to develop more complex views, to synthesise and integrate material, and to develop knowledge and academic skills in general.

In a very different kind of study with a stronger international focus, Toyokawa and Toyokawa's (2002) examination of 84 Japanese learners undertaking a 10-month program in the United States positively related extracurricular involvement to students' general life satisfaction. The program, which saw the encouragement of students in volunteering as well as cultural exchange activities, enabled international learners to acquire the values and customs of the host country as well as to practise the social skills and the language which they had learned in the classroom (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). In a similar vein, Halvorsen *et al.* (2003) conceded from their study that by spending time with groups of people outside the host community, an international student was less likely to enhance their English language skills and to make cultural adjustments. In addition, they found that frequent interaction between international students and Americans led to higher levels of satisfaction in communication and adjustments to American life and noted further that "it

may be a rational choice to spend time with native English speakers in order to practice and improve language skills, and gain more satisfaction" (Halvorsen *et al.*, 2003). In line with these cultural and linguistic benefits, Hood, Riahiinejad and White (1986) have reported the positive relationship between college students' participation in campus activities and confidence and Barratt and Huba (1994) have suggested a link between poor English and low levels of self-esteem. Meanwhile, other studies have substantiated Toyokawa and Toyokawa's claim that a positive relationship exists between the amount and frequency of international students' social interactions with host nationals and their adjustment to the host country (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). One such study by Surdam and Collins (1984) reported a clear link between the time spent by international students with their host friends and their adjustment to the host society, whilst another by Sellitz and Cook (1962) claimed that international students who made at least one close friend in the United States felt a stronger affinity with the host nation than those with no host friends. Antler's (1970) survey of 170 foreign medical residents in the United States similarly concluded that those who had frequent contact with host nationals were more active and satisfied with life than those who had less contact with host nationals.

## **The Research**

This paper attempts to bridge the theoretical gap between the work of Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2000), which focusses on international students without measuring more specific gains in areas such as language and cultural observation, and Kuh, which focusses successfully on personal development benefits but which deals almost exclusively with home-based (largely white Caucasian) students. Through the use of reflective questionnaires and interviews, data will be gathered on the volunteering placements of a number of international students. Specific questions will be asked in the areas of language (for example, the acquisition of new vocabulary and slang), cultural awareness (for example, observations about the British workplace and labour market) and personal development (especially in relation to transferable skills). In this way, it is hoped that more fruitful conclusions can be reached regarding international learners' experiences in out-of-class activities - in this case volunteering - and the extent to which this type of placement can realise benefits to the learners in terms of language, culture and employability.

The initial study – conducted in Spring 2006 - focussed on 3 University of Wolverhampton students in their early to late twenties:

### **Taiwanese student (female):**

- course of study: English Plus Foundation 2005-06;
- volunteer placement: Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton, Feb-June 2006;
- has progressed to MSc Health Science 2006-07

### **Japanese student (female):**

- course of study: English Plus Foundation 2005-06;
- volunteering placement: Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton, Feb-June 2006;

- has progressed to MSc Environmental Science 2006-07

**Kurdistan student (male):**

- course of study: MA Voluntary & Public Sector 2005- (formerly English Plus Foundation 2004-05);
- volunteer placement: Outreach Worker/Support Officer, Wolverhampton 2003-05

The first two carried out their placements on a weekly basis in the period February-May 2006 and were given a questionnaire to complete after each placement followed by an interview about one or two days later. The questionnaire and the interview focussed on the following questions:

- What did you gain linguistically from the placement?
- What difficulties did you face when spoken to during the placement?
- What did you learn about your organisation and/or British people?
- What skills has the placement helped you with?

The Japanese student attended nine out of thirteen arranged placements, completed seven questionnaires and was interviewed on nine occasions; the Taiwanese student attended ten out of thirteen arranged placements, completed eight questionnaires and was interviewed on six occasions. The qualitative study below contains their written statements from the questionnaires and their spoken answers from the interviews.

The third student, from Kurdistan, was interviewed twice about his volunteer experiences which he had undertaken 1-3 years before. He was asked the same questions as above.

**Outcomes & Benefits****1. Language**

Linguistic shortcomings were reflected upon by all of the respondents, especially in the area of listening comprehension. The problem appeared two-fold: firstly, the students had difficulty with the local or regional West Midlands dialect, which clearly contrasted sharply with the more formalised English used in the classroom; secondly, they found the pace of the native speakers too fast and simply could not follow the conversation. These shortcomings are reflected in the following comments:

*“...because if I’m speaking (with) outside people, their accent is very strong and fast so I could not understand. Also I am very shy to speaking other people. But staff speaking more slowly – so I comfortable to them and I can understand. But I can’t understand other people. If they want to order something, I check with other people (i.e. staff) because actually I not sure.”*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

*“I talked one of counsellors about my listening problem. I could understand teacher’s speaking but I can hardly understand local people. After talking, he said, ‘I also sometime can’t understand West Midland accent; speaking speed is fast, isn’t it?’ I was surprised British people have same situation.”*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

There were also problems pertaining to vocabulary items. For example, the student from Kurdistan revealed his confusion over a legal term which had a dual meaning:

*“Before going to court, the word ‘sentence’ meant ‘sentence’ – I did not know it meant ‘punishment’. It became very funny. So a long sentence – you were waiting to hear a long sentence. I was expecting a big paragraph. I did not know (it meant) a long jail sentence.”*

(Kurdistan student: English Plus Foundation 2004-05 & MA Voluntary & Public Sector 2005-; Outreach worker/Support officer, Wolverhampton, 2003-05)

On the other hand, a number of gains were reported in lexical items, especially in three areas: everyday words, subject-specific items and slang.

#### (i) Everyday words

The students generally appeared proactive in their learning of vocabulary and were able to extract new words from their conversations during their placements. The following extract from the Taiwanese student demonstrates this:

*“Yesterday I learned this word – ‘bungalow’. This volunteer told me (this word). She told me info, could you write down this word. She was very kind. She drew a picture to me.”*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

When serving customers during their placement, the same student captured some new food-related vocabulary:

*“They (the customers) will use slang – like pop – and some special (words)...squash. And pickle, they order the pickle. Before I didn’t try this one...onion pickles. I learn ‘pickle’.”*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

#### (ii) Subject-specific items

Other conversations enabled the students to learn new words connected to their fields of study. For instance, the Japanese student, who was to progress to a Masters course in Environmental Science upon the completion of their English course and the volunteering placement, reflected upon the acquisition of a number of new words during a conversation at the organic garden centre:

*"I worked with another volunteer who is local person, nearly 60 years. He knows well about gardening and taught me some flowers name: fuchsia, peragonium, geranium, etc. We talked about 'Bonsai' which Japanese style of growing trees."*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

The same learner then reflected positively upon their vocabulary acquisition and saw how their learning in the placement was able to provide other transferable benefits:

*"I know Japanese word – but I don't know specific word. I do not know word in English. If I listen this word, I can't understand, so normally I ask again and again. I don't know this kind of word – propagation. He (the supervisor) explained to me... it's kind of gardening word. After that, I checked this word so now I understand. If I continue to work in this place, I can continue to understand new words which are useful for my study."*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

Similar benefits were reflected upon by the Taiwanese student whose placement at the coffee shop for the blind enabled them to learn new vocabulary closely associated with their degree subject (Health Science):

*"I ask her (= the volunteer) about (this) because some disability (disabled people) don't have money... how can they have money to live in the house? And she told me 'social service' (new word)."*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton, Spring 2006)

### (iii) Slang

Students were also at pains to point out the number of occasions where they noticed or enquired about the use of slang in their placement. Conversations between the Japanese student and a younger native-speaking volunteer, for example, produced a wide range of colloquial expressions on the part of the latter. Slang phrases such as 'hang on', 'hold on', 'oh sugar!', 'oh sod!' and 'Jesus Christ!' (to reflect one's disappointment) were picked up by the Japanese student with some amusement.

## 2. Cultural Awareness

A significant amount of interest in British cultural issues was revealed in the learners' reflections. Some of this interest was sparked by a desire on their part to learn more about issues relating to their degree subject (for example, the workings of the National Health Service). In other cases, the interest was more general and observational and focussed, for example, upon Britain's multicultural environment and the UK labour market.

The Taiwanese student, whose placement preceded her MSc in Health Science, recollected a number of insights they had gained about the health service in the UK:

*"I learned about hospital system. You need to wait a long time; in UK, if people want to have surgery, they wait a long time, like 1-2 months. But in my country, they don't tell you the date – you just take the surgery. You don't wait a long time. We also spoke about hospital system in our country. They are a little different."*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton; has progressed to MSc Health Science 2006-07)

*"Some disability (disabled people) don't have money... how can they have money to live in the house? And she (the volunteer) told me 'social service' (new word). But I not very sure about this one. So if they have some accident, Government will help them get some money to their life."*

(Taiwanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Coffee Shop for the Blind, Wolverhampton; has progressed to MSc Health Science 2006-07)

The other students both remarked upon cultural issues less connected with their degree subjects but which revealed their genuine interest in British life and culture. The Kurdistan student, for example, focussed upon a number of insights which he had gained from the placement:

*"We see cultural and political things. We see procedures in court. Other events with other communities. In Heath Town, different events... you can see from different cultures...cultural diversity. You can see Somalian and African culture."*

(Kurdistan student: English Plus Foundation 2004-05; Outreach worker/Support officer, Wolverhampton 2003-05; now studying MA Voluntary & Public Sector 2005-)

The Japanese student, by contrast, was particularly interested in and surprised by their organisation's flexible employment patterns:

*“I learned about fluid working system in the organisation. Working people change a lot because of short contract: 6 months. Some people who I worked together (with) left from the organisation. I was surprised because I didn’t know they already left last month.”*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton; has progressed to MSc Environmental Science 2006-07)

These observations are very interesting in that they reveal international students making a clear distinction between systems which operate in their own countries and those which operate in the UK. They also show the learners reflecting clearly upon cultural insights which have been acquired as a result of the placements.

### 3. Personal Development

Before the placements began, there was clear evidence that the students were highly motivated and appreciated the value and potential benefits of working in their local community. The Japanese student, in particular, saw the placement as a way of meeting a number of goals:

*“I don’t have opportunity to contact with British and local people. If I do volunteering, I want to do in the field of the environment because next semester I will proceed to Masters in Environment, so I want to make a connection about environment organisation before I take Masters course. If possibilities in the future, I want to work in the UK – but it’s very difficult so I want to have a chance to contact with them. English course is useful but I want to get opportunity to enhance my experience.”*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton; has progressed to MSc Environmental Science 2006-07)

Here the learner revealed a number of ways in which they hoped the placement would enable them to transfer knowledge into their degree studies and into possible future employment. However, during the course of the placement, the same learner seemed to get slightly frustrated that some of these goals were not being attained. They acknowledged the benefits gained in communication and language skills as a consequence of speaking with native speakers but admitted that they were not sure how the placement was helping them with their future career. Nevertheless, there were several cases of the learner acquiring a number of practical skills:

*“This week they taught me to grow up herbs and vegetables.”*



*“I have never tried about herbs. Yesterday I learned...I took photos like these (shows photos). I put in compost into the pot (shows photos of placement).”*

*“I learn how to...because this plants are organic plants...so it's different way compared with normal vegetables.”*

(Japanese student: English Plus Foundation 2005-06; volunteering at Organic Garden Centre, Wolverhampton; has progressed to MSc Environmental Science 2006-07)

The Taiwanese learner did not reveal or acknowledge any real transferable gains. However, the Kurdistan student spoke very positively of his placement experience:

*“After TLC (Training & Learning Centre), now I can be a coordinator in any organisation in relation to housing. I did learn some things – how to manage communication with people, how to treat them, how to refer them to some relevant places if you can't help them yourself, how to use your personal initiative. I know something now about housing associations, rent, tenancy agreements, problems with landlord, flat rights, repairs by landlord... all these things are in relation to housing.”*

(Kurdistan student: English Plus Foundation 2004-05; volunteering at TLC Housing Services, Wolverhampton 2003-05; now studying MA Voluntary & Public Sector 2005-)

The learner appeared to have made a clear connection between the placement and the learning of both skills and knowledge which could be adapted to a future working environment. However, this learner alone was able to make such a positive correlation between the placement and their own personal development.

## **Evaluation, Future Research & Developments**

Results of the interviews and questionnaires indicated clear gains in the areas of language and cultural awareness. However, the students were in general less able to make a connection between the skills they were using on the placement and how these could be transferred into a future working environment (in line with findings of Liverpool John Moores University Learning Development Unit's website on Encouraging Reflective Learning). This raised the question over whether students were truly reflecting and thinking critically upon their experiences, and/or whether we as educators were guiding them sufficiently to enable them to see how skills used or gained on the placement could be transferred into other meaningful contexts. It was thus felt that a more guided approach could be adopted, possibly through the use of a guided learner journal and some supportive classroom sessions. This may help to enhance the recognition of transferability (alongside linguistic and cultural awareness), and that these methods could be used with a new group of students from a similar English Language Foundation module in 2007/8.

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